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PRIORITY THEMES

EQUALITY: VULNERABLE WOMEN, INCLUDING MIGRANT WOMEN

Report of the Secretary-General

SUMMARY

The Economic and Social Council, in its resolution 1987/24, selected the issue of vulnerable women, including migrant women, under the priority theme "Equality", for discussion by the Commission at its thirty-fifth session. On the basis of a series of expert group meetings and seminars dealing with specific groups of women, as well as a final expert group meeting on the subject of vulnerable women, problems common to all groups, as well as those that are specific to each, are identified in the present report. The concept of vulnerability is based on a higher risk of becoming disadvantaged, often resulting in a combined effect when discrimination based on sex is added to discrimination based on individual or socio-economic characteristics. Most aspects of vulnerability can be tackled by policies aimed at the general advancement of women or policies dealing with specific characteristics of a group, regardless of sex. Some problems remain, however, for which policies are needed that are specific to women in a given group. In general, the strong potential for advocacy among certain groups is seen as a positive factor for the general advancement of women. The role of non-governmental organizations is highlighted in the report.

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INTRODUCTION

1. The priority themes for each session of the Commission on the Status of Women until 1992 were established in Economic and Social Council resolution 1987/24. The theme for the thirty-fifth session, in 1991, is "Vulnerable women, including migrant women", under the heading "Equality". In the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women, 1/ 14 groups of women were identified* "who, because of their special characteristics, are experiencing not only the common problems indicated under the separate themes but also specific difficulties due to their socio-economic and health condition, age, minority status or a combination of these factors". 2/ In order to focus discussion on the priority theme, in consultation with the Commission, five main groups have been selected: women who are heads of household, young women, migrant women, disabled women and elderly women.**

2. In its resolution 1987/24, the Council recommended that preparatory meetings on the themes should be held, when funds were available. Seminars were held on specific groups of vulnerable women. The situation of migrant women was examined at a seminar organized by the Population Division, Department of International Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, from 27 to 30 March 1990 at San Miniato, Italy. From 4 to 8 June 1990, an international symposium on the integration of young people into society, which dealt with young women, among other issues, was organized by the Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs of the United Nations Office at Vienna, and was held at Toledo. A seminar on the issue of disabled women was jointly convened by the Division for the Advancement of Women and Disabled Peoples' International, an international non-governmental organization, from 20 to 24 August 1990 at Vienna. The United Nations International Conference on Aging Populations in the Context of the Family, organized by the Population Division of the United Nations Secretariat at Kitakyushu, Japan, from 15 to 19 October 1990, dealt with the problems of elderly women. Finally, an expert group meeting on vulnerable women, focusing on female heads of household, was convened at Vienna from 26 to 30 November 1990; it dealt with the specific problems both of female heads of household and of vulnerable groups of women generally.***

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*Women in areas affected by drought, poor women in urban areas, elderly women, young women, abused women, destitute women, women victims of trafficking and involuntary prostitution, women deprived of their traditional means of livelihood, women who are sole supporter of families, women with physical and mental disabilities, women in detention and subject to penal law, refugee and displaced women and children, migrant women, minority and "indigenous" women.

**In its resolution 34/4 (See Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 1990, Supplement No. 5 (E/1990/25)), the Commission on the Status of Women, referring to women in situations of extreme vulnerability, mentioned particularly "women as heads of household, elderly women and disabled women".

***The conclusions and recommendations on disabled women and on female heads of household are contained in a conference room paper to be presented to the Commission (E/CN.6/1991/CRP.1). The conclusions and recommendations on disabled women are also reproduced in Women 2000, No. 1, 1991.

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I. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

3. Vulnerability is a concept that can help to pinpoint both groups at risk and the factors that create disadvantage. It is important, however, to avoid associating the concept with victimization, helplessness, passivity and guilt. Women in groups that are considered vulnerable do, in fact, make important economic contributions to society and the family and their ability to contribute to and benefit from economic and social development should be enhanced.

A. Vulnerable groups as a whole

4. Programmes for women, whether they are general or aimed at specific groups, should be seen in the context of women's normal progress through the various stages of life, in the realization that they and their contemporaries share similar experiences, and that their interests and way of life differ from those of other age groups and change as they age. Different age groups can be targeted by programmes designed to prevent problems from emerging later in life. For example, investment in the education of young women affects their future economic independence.

5. A major effort should be made to ensure that women of all ages have full access to education and training, as well as to health and nutrition, so as to increase their economic and social opportunities. Such policies and programmes should be addressed to the main risk factors for women in specific groups but should also meet women's needs in terms of the hours at which the programmes are available and their physical accessibility, as well as staff training requirements.

6. Stereotyped perceptions of women who are members of specific groups should be eliminated. The mass media can play an important role by portraying women in diverse situations and emphasizing their contributions to society. Special efforts should be made to make men and women working in the mass media more sensitive to this issue. The United Nations should continue its efforts to disseminate information on these groups and make it accessible to all women, including those with sensory disabilities.

7. "Empowering" women in these groups should be seen as the key to designing adequate policies. Non-governmental and other organizations play crucial roles in this respect by giving them the means of participating in or influencing decision-making regarding social and economic policies, and the opportunities to do so. These organizations should be supported at both the national and international levels.

8. Governments should ensure that programmes take into account the needs and potential of vulnerable women. The means of monitoring the implementation of legislation and the use of funds should be developed. Governments should use a participatory approach to programme design by involving representatives of the groups concerned both in the design process and in the management and execution of the ensuing programmes. Governments should also take steps to create a legal and institutional environment conducive to the effective functioning of diverse national and community organizations.

9. Non-governmental organizations should include representatives of specific groups of women and should play a role in mobilizing information on their needs and potentials. They should put pressure on Governments to adopt policies that

deal with the needs of intended beneficiaries as well as monitoring the speed and effectiveness with which the programmes are implemented. Organizations should co-ordinate their actions so as to increase their strength and impact. This "multiple tracking" of organizations, by focusing on group-specific and gender-specific issues, forming alliances and co-operating in implementation, should become an integral part of any strategy for the advancement of women and for the solution of group-specific problems.

10. Development assistance is an important source of funding for governmental and non-governmental organizations concerned with these groups of women and efforts should be made to facilitate access to international resources. International development assistance organizations should assemble and disseminate information on possible sources of funding to the organizations concerned. Project documents and reporting procedures should be simplified, training in project formulation provided and, in developing countries, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and other international organizations should assist national non-governmental organizations in preparing and directing project requests.

B. Specific groups

1. Young women

11. Adolescent women should be given information and education regarding sexual behaviour and family planning. Sex education, including information on family planning and contraception, especially before young women begin to be sexually active, should be incorporated into school curricula. Special programmes should be developed to prevent teen-age pregnancies and legal measures should be endorsed to raise the legal minimum age of marriage. When pregnancy occurs, care for pregnant teen-age mothers should be improved, to include medically supervised deliveries, better nutrition, pre-natal and post-natal care and counselling. Pregnant adolescents should not be prevented from continuing formal schooling and should be encouraged not to drop out of school. Adequate support services in the school and community, enforced by appropriate legal actions, should be used to dissuade them from giving up their schooling, as continued education reduces the likelihood of future poverty.

2. Migrant women

12. Governments of receiving countries should ensure that all migrants, especially women, are given information, in a language that they know, on their legal rights and obligations. Such information should include legal advice to female migrants, especially on how to acquire and maintain legal status, on marriage and divorce, domestic violence, labour laws, legislation on sex discrimination, and welfare and other social entitlements, including family planning. Counselling services should also be provided. Associations of and for migrant women should be used to disseminate information among migrants, provide counselling and other social and legal services, identify problems and communicate with decision-makers. Migrant women should be entitled to the same rights as migrant men. Governments should periodically review and, where necessary, revise migration policies and legislation, as well as their implementation, to prevent discriminatory practices against women.

3. Elderly women

13. Since care and care-giving are central issues for elderly women, policies should be developed to ensure that family care for the aged does not hamper future gains in women's status or their range of opportunities. Providing care should be a voluntary act on the part of both informal providers and recipients but should not be taken to absolve society of its responsibility to provide high-quality care. Special measures should be taken to ensure that a minimum level of income is provided to older women living in poverty, including legislative changes to introduce flexible retirement for women and to enable them to increase their level of pension. Social security policies should ensure that women acquire social protection in their own right and should recognize the value of the contribution women make to the care of their children and other dependants.

4. Women with disabilities

14. Many women with disabilities have great difficulty in getting married and setting up a family. To help them, counselling and training should be provided, including access to sex education and family planning information. Disabled women should also have full access to rights to primary, secondary and higher education, including mainstream schools, and special tuition requirements should be waived and supporting services provided where necessary. Disabled women should have access to all appropriate vocational training programmes and should be encouraged to seek well-paid employment. Legislation and practices that discourage or prevent women with disabilities from participating in the labour force should be changed. Women should receive basic financial support in order to compensate for the costs of such disability-related services as personal assistance services, transportation, housing, technical aids and health care.

5. Female heads of household

15. The double obligations arising from being both a woman and a head of household result in further vulnerability when children and dependants make additional demands on their time and labour. In designing programmes dealing with such issues as housing and rural development, and training programmes, care should be taken to ensure that requirements for voluntary labour by participants do not deny women the opportunity of becoming beneficiaries, thus prolonging or worsening their economic plight. Similar care should be taken when social support or other social programmes are designed. Relevant actions include the development of policies for the care of dependants.

16. Access to housing is a basic requirement, but it is a major problem for households headed by women. The expansion of low-cost housing can benefit such households if the allocations are based on criteria that do not discriminate against households with a single parent and dependants, particularly if headed by a woman.

II. MAIN PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED BY VULNERABLE WOMEN

A. Commonalities

17. The experiences of vulnerable women vary considerably. Very old women do not have the same problems as women in their sixties, and the situation of old

women in extended families is different from that of women who live alone. For migrant women, migration can mean improved status if the general situation of women in the receiving country is more advanced than it is in the sending country. It can also produce situations of unacceptable exploitation. While the proportion of households with a woman at the head is usually highest among poor people, some households are wealthy. Many female heads of household are middle-aged mothers with children in their charge, while others are elderly or young women living alone.

1. Factors governing vulnerability and their combined effects

18. There is a considerable commonality of experience between the five groups of vulnerable women analysed with respect both to their individual characteristics and to the problems encountered. Some women may come into several categories, for example when aging leads to disability, or when a young woman migrating alone becomes ipso facto the head of the household. These groups of vulnerable women may be subject to similar risks, including dependence on public welfare programmes, isolation and marginalization, and exposure to violence.

19. The factors governing vulnerability suggest that these women are at greater risk than other members of society. As a result of the combination of gender-based discrimination and the constraints to which a member of a specific group is subject, it is probable that the living conditions of these women will be below an acceptable minimum standard.

20. All people are vulnerable if vulnerability is accepted as meaning that those people are at risk of becoming disadvantaged, that is, of living below the minimum standard set of conditions that society considers acceptable.* An individual may be considered disadvantaged because he or she has lost a job, is ill or has been deprived of the means of earning a living or of the right to do so. Vulnerability is partly the result of actions taken in the past and partly the result of external unpredictable factors such as sickness or accident. The risk of future disadvantage is increased or decreased by choices made or imposed regarding access to education and training, entry into the labour market, or composition of the family. For example, individuals may be trained in traditional, out-dated skills, and this may increase the likelihood of unemployment in the future.

21. Groups composed of individuals whose common characteristics are associated with a higher probability of future disadvantage can be considered vulnerable. Members of these groups will have one main factor in common, such as being old or very young, having a disability, or being a migrant or single parent. This factor is associated with specific disadvantages. For example, a disabled person may lack access to public transport or services, or may be discriminated against in the labour market. Whether elderly, disabled or a migrant, a person is affected by the choices made at each previous stage of life, but the current condition may increase the probability of making inappropriate choices. The chance that vulnerable individuals will make such

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*For a discussion on the issue of vulnerability, see the background paper before the Expert Group Meeting on Vulnerable Women, held at Vienna, from 26 to 30 November 1990, entitled "A general approach to vulnerability" (EGM/VW/1990/BP.2).

choices is higher than it is for other individuals. The situation may lead them to make unfavourable choices. For example, children of migrants or children with a disability may not attend school or a migrant may not qualify for a training course because of his or her inability to speak the language of the country.

22. Discrimination against women may also result in individual circumstances that have long-term consequences, for example when girls are systematically discouraged from attending schools or the health and nutrition of female children are neglected. Vulnerable women may be denied certain rights accorded to vulnerable men. In many countries, for example, single women parents are not entitled to buy or possess land, or obtain credit, while men in the same situation do have that right. Migrant women may be admitted to a country as dependants but not have the same right to economic activity as men.

23. There is a distinction between vulnerability linked to individual characteristics and vulnerability linked to gender. Being both a member of a vulnerable group and a woman can result in a two-fold disadvantage. A disabled woman is vulnerable not only because of her disability but also because being a woman may mean that she is given lower priority for studies or employment. Being both disabled and a woman may mean not being able to exercise certain rights, such as the right to have children and care for them. Similarly, a female head of household may be particularly vulnerable because of the unique combination of being a woman and a head of household, with the double burden that those two roles imply.

24. This combination of factors explains why vulnerable women often experience disadvantages that would not normally result from being simply old, disabled, or a single parent. For example, female heads of household are said to be often the "poorest among the poor", while elderly, disabled or migrant women frequently fall victim to specific types of violence. One manifestation of vulnerability, what has been called a "weak ability to cope", 3/ is seen in individuals who have not been given the means, such as education, training and access to productive factors, to enter the labour market and so to earn an adequate living. There is also a type of social vulnerability, which arises, for example, when an individual does not receive adequate support. Vulnerability factors, as well as economic and social change, often combine to deny vulnerable women support and to reduce their ability to cope. The informal support provided to vulnerable women by the extended family or by the local community may be eroded by poverty or migration. Vulnerable women may not receive formal social support, including that of welfare systems, because they are unaware of existing services because those services are poorly adapted to their needs. Vulnerable women may be clustered in poorly paid jobs or unemployed because of their limited education or as a result of discrimination.

2. Policy implications

25. The factors mentioned above have implications for policy design. Since the situation of vulnerable women is the result of decisions made at an earlier stage, programming and planning have to go beyond actions designed only to alleviate the results of past decisions. Long-term actions are needed to remove the basis for disadvantage. Interventions must be made at each point of the life-cycle to discourage choices that will increase the risk of future disadvantage. The effects of poor earlier decisions are clearly visible in the

case of older women. Planning for aging must include actions aimed at promoting young women's access to education and training. Encouraging them to enter the labour market will generally improve their later economic well-being. Similarly, providing young women with the means to pursue a career is a pre-condition to reducing their vulnerability if they later become heads of household, by choice or circumstance.

26. Improving the situation of vulnerable women calls for policies for the advancement of women generally. Similarly, improving the situation of all individuals having the same vulnerability characteristics, regardless of sex, will help women in those groups. But there should also be targeted actions aimed at alleviating the vulnerability that is attached to the combined circumstance of being a woman and being vulnerable.

27. Reducing the number of causes of vulnerability is only possible through actions targeting all women and girls. At the Expert Group Meeting on Vulnerable Women the importance was noted of policies promoting female access to education and training and productive factors, such as land and credit, as well as policies for ensuring that women had an adequate level of nutrition and health. It was felt that in the long run effective implementation of such policies would equip vulnerable women with adequate means of earning a decent living and keeping healthy. In particular, it was stated that, while one of the main problems for female heads of household was the lack of access to land and credit, the solution lay in the development of programmes designed to increase access to land and credit for all women and for the poor, rather than in actions to establish quotas or preferential access for women heads of household.

28. Similarly, it was pointed out at the Seminar on Disabled Women that access to education should be promoted for all girls, and that access to mainstream schools needed to be secured for disabled girls. Specific actions were needed, however, to ensure that disabled girls benefited equally from these efforts. Support was also expressed for policies aimed at reducing the double burden experienced by women in most societies, for example, by providing special services for child and other dependant care or by promoting other actions for the sharing of care-giving inside the family, as well as between the family and society. Society expects women to take care of their children and other dependants. As long as this task is exclusively performed by them, they will be more vulnerable than men.

29. Action to promote the participation of all women in decision-making is a basic pre-condition if vulnerable women are to make their voices heard.

30. Policies designed to serve the needs of all the individuals within a group, comprising, for example, the aging, the disabled, single parents, migrants and young people, will have a positive effect on the women members of this group. Ensuring that public transport and public services are accessible to persons with disabilities will allow women with disabilities to have access to such facilities. Ensuring that training programmes are accessible to migrants who do not speak the language of the country is a pre-condition for access to training by migrant women.

31. Policies, however, are sometimes designed and implemented in such a way that women are excluded from the benefits. The Expert Group on Vulnerable Women noted that, although the policies for vulnerable groups usually had

gender-neutral objectives, they often developed a bias when they were being implemented because they were designed around the particular needs and constraints of men.

32. In addition to actions targeting all women or all vulnerable individuals, the Expert Group suggested a common strategy for vulnerable women. "Empowering" vulnerable women should be the principal factor in the design and implementation of adequate policies. It is necessary for vulnerable women to participate actively in the taking of decisions on the design and implementation of policies, to ensure that general policies for women or for vulnerable groups adequately meet the needs and constraints of vulnerable women.

33. For this to occur, the best use must be made of existing resources and there must be no wasted effort. The Expert Group expressed the view that the existence of non-governmental organizations representing various groups of women would increase those groups' chances of exercising effective pressure on national and international policies. For this strategy to be successful, non-governmental organizations must co-operate actively with each other. Organizations with particular experience and skills in advocacy can help other organizations to develop similar skills. Governments can create an environment that will help to strengthen non-governmental organizations by providing a stable but flexible legal and institutional framework. Governments can also involve non-governmental organizations in the design and implementation of public projects.

34. A coherent strategy can promote constructive associations between various organizations. Co-ordination between organizations of specific groups of women is essential for concluding alliances in specific actions or organizing umbrella organizations. This strategy can lead to stronger pressure being exerted on decision-makers and can increase the allocation of resources for the advancement of women, and in particular for vulnerable women. Where resources for development and for women in particular are scarce, one method of increasing assistance to vulnerable women appears to be to develop mainstream projects for them as parts of larger projects in areas where funds are available. Examples of priority areas where funds are available and where a woman's dimension can be easily incorporated include health and nutrition projects, environment projects and programmes for small enterprises.

B. Specific groups

1. Young women

35. The specific vulnerability of young women in the context of their "life course" demonstrates conditions that are predestined very early in life. Young women become disadvantaged and vulnerable when they make decisions that result in difficulties in later years. Very often the decisions are imposed rather than freely chosen. In terms of education, training and employment, cultural norms and social background may reduce or increase possibilities and options.

36. In developing countries, the illiteracy rate is still higher for girls than it is for boys, especially in rural areas. At the second and third levels of education and professional training, many girls choose traditionally female-oriented subjects and professions, for which the career path is restricted. Their potential is thus not used to the full.

37. Compared with young men, young women have fewer possibilities and choices regarding health and reproduction, a situation that may be ascribed to tradition or ignorance. Young women are most vulnerable when it comes to sexual behaviour, especially if early sexual experiences are accompanied by early pregnancies. An early pregnancy will dramatically influence the life of a young woman, steering her towards a care-giving role while impeding her professional development.

38. Sexual exposure among unmarried teenagers often starts at a very early age and varies from region to region. A reduction in the age of puberty has been observed and the age of first sexual experiences has been declining worldwide over the past 30 years. In the long term, the risk of early pregnancy, with all its negative effects, may be the decisive influence on the life of a young woman. In developed countries, the proportion of unwed teen-age mothers has increased since the 1970s.

39. An early marriage, especially if accompanied by early motherhood, can eliminate or reduce the educational, social and labour force options for the young woman. The age at first pregnancy influences not only the level of education, but also the level of fertility. Married teenagers under the age of 17 years have particularly high birth rates in Asia (31 per cent), Latin America (39 per cent), and Africa (40 per cent) but the rates are relatively low in Europe (22 per cent). Fertility rates are directly related to age at marriage and to the length of the marriage. Later marriage brings a higher level of education and a lower level of fertility, due not only to the shorter reproductive period but also to increased knowledge about family planning.

40. Very early child-bearing, before complete physical maturity, entails a number of risks for the health of the mother. In many developing countries, the health of young women is already affected by food deficiencies that increase the risk of severe medical problems during pregnancy. If this is compounded by inadequate pre-natal and post-natal care, a teen-age mother's health and the health of her child may be seriously affected. Statistics indicate that maternal mortality is significantly higher for teen-age mothers than for mothers aged between 20 and 34 years. Infant mortality of children born to mothers under 18 years is also higher. 4/

41. In developing countries, many unwed pregnant teenagers resort to abortion. In addition to the psychological stress that this implies, many young women living in countries where abortion is prohibited by law or who lack the financial means submit themselves to illegal abortions that may endanger their health. This is a major cause of maternal morbidity and sterility.

42. The social consequences of teen-age pregnancies are considerable. Many teen-age mothers have to leave school when they become pregnant or give birth. Their educational and professional opportunities are thereby reduced. Furthermore, because of their child-care responsibilities, they will not be able to engage in full-time paid employment and may have to change their jobs or remain unemployed. The most serious problems are faced by the teen-age mother in urban areas, who cannot rely on a family network for child care. A link exists between early pregnancies and the emergence of households headed by women, living under the poorest conditions. Premature parenthood, linked to poor living conditions, influences the lives of the next generation, as studies on intergenerational transmission of poverty from teen-age mothers to their children have shown. 5/

43. Early sexual experiences also increase the risk of sexually transmitted diseases. Factors linked to the reproductive role of women and to their subordinate status make young women especially vulnerable to infection with the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)-acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS). Owing to unprotected sexual behaviour, there has been a considerable increase of sexually transmitted diseases among young women within the past 20 years. This has a negative influence on future fertility. Certain epidemiological studies have reported a higher prevalence of HIV in women than in men in the 15-to-24-year age group. 6/ HIV infection has particular consequences for the future life of the woman, her caring role in the family and her motherhood, since she has a 35-65 per cent risk of transmitting the disease to the baby.

2. Migrant women

44. The number of female migrants has been increasing in all parts of the world, especially in the developed countries. The growing number of women in internal and external migration has brought with it a feminization of migration. The most common reason for female migration is family reunification. The most typical pattern is a first wave of migration triggered by the economic situation in the home country, where economic recession brings with it a deterioration in living conditions engendering transnational migration by males for work purposes, and a second wave consisting of female migrants joining family members.

45. Strict laws on immigration may produce changes in the sex and age distribution of migrants. In a strategy aimed at family survival, women may be sent on independent migration to take up employment either in the domestic service or health sector, which are the most accessible for female migrants. From an analysis of independent female migration patterns, it would appear that childless, widowed, separated and divorced women migrate more often than other women. For marginalized women, migration may represent an escape from a society that discriminates against women or from unhappy family situations. Migration with a view to marrying a national of the host country is another form of independent migration by young women. In developing countries, mainly in Asia, there has been an increase in the number of marriages arranged by specialized marriage agencies, trafficking young women as "mail-order brides".

46. The average age at migration has fallen considerably and the majority of female migrants are now in the 16-24-year age group. 7/ This trend is due in part to changes in the general population structure, and the larger numbers of young people generally, but it is also related to the fact that these young people often find few employment opportunities in their home country. It also reflects the large number of young women joining husbands who had migrated earlier, or young women migrating independently in order to find employment. The high concentration in the lower age categories parallels a high participation by young migrant women in wage-earning activities in either the formal or the informal sector.

47. The employment rates for female migrants are often higher than those for female nationals in many host countries. There are a number of reasons for this. Migrant men usually work in poorly paid jobs and cannot secure an adequate family income. Unemployment affects migrant workers first, and men more than women because women work in lower wage categories than men. Cultural norms, such as the traditional role of women in the household, are often put aside in order to give priority to wage-earning activities. Migrant women are

concentrated in a limited number of economic sectors and unskilled jobs in the industrial and tertiary sector. The proportion of migrant women working in the underground economy with no work permit or in undeclared employment is believed to be very high.

48. Working conditions for migrant workers are, in general, worse than they are for native workers. Since, however, migrant men have had easier access to vocational training, they are usually better skilled than migrant women. As a result, migrant women have less access to better paid jobs. They also run a higher risk of accidents and work-related diseases. Indirect discrimination affects access to employment. Migrant women find themselves refused jobs on grounds of their foreign origin, supposed lack of relevant experience or other reasons linked to their family situation, child rearing or frequent returns to the home country. Many migrant women work under unsafe conditions, often with obsolete equipment, and undertake excessive overtime and strenuous shift work. Many find no regular employment and turn to the informal sector, where there are more accidents. Furthermore, women in domestic services often suffer from sexual harassment and humiliation by their employers.

49. Migrant women can also face legal discrimination. Women who migrate in order to reunite the family are considered dependent on the male head of the family and may not themselves be able to acquire residence and work permits. If divorced or widowed, they may have great difficulty in supporting their family. Social assistance or continuous residence and work permits may be difficult to obtain or may be denied. This situation is clearly worse for women who have migrated clandestinely, particularly if they did not acquire any rights during their stay in the host country. If the family situation changes, they may become stranded. This applies equally to foreign women marrying a national from the host country, who are entirely dependent on their husbands as long as they have not acquired the nationality of the country of residence or an independent residence permit.

50. In general, migrant women have a lower level of language proficiency than migrant men because of their initial lower level of education and the double burden of work both within and outside the household. Language deficiency makes them more vulnerable in social life and in the job market. Because of problems of communication and acculturation, linked with the fact that many migrant women have little schooling and education, there is insufficient knowledge of legal rights among the population of female migrants. Many are not aware of their rights concerning employment, education or other social aspects of life, such as housing and health or schooling of their children.

51. Many migrant women suffer from various health problems linked to the particularly stressful situation of migration, separation and adjustment to different cultural patterns, expectations and frustrations. Psychosomatic illness and physical health problems caused by bad working conditions often occur among migrant women, although many do not seek medical treatment.

3. Elderly women

52. Age alone does not necessarily imply vulnerability, unless it is accompanied by ill health, economic insecurity or social isolation. It is linked to the feminization of poverty and the growing number of households headed by females, in that women represent a disproportionately large number within that age group.

53. Women usually have a longer life expectancy than men. In 1980, the sex ratio in the world's population above 60 years was 100 females to 80 males. Above 70 years, the sex ratio was 100 females to 71 males. 8/ In Latin America, for example, the total number of elderly people of both sexes is expected to more than triple over the period 1985-2025 and will approach 100 million in 2025. It is projected that 54 per cent of the elderly will be women. A distinction has to be made between older women (60-74 years) and very old women (75 years and above), who are less mobile and frequently need special care. When counting the life expectancy of older women and calculating it in human "capital" years, it becomes evident that the large and growing number of elderly persons requires policies that will meet their special needs and will make provisions for them as dependants; at the same, this highlights the potential resources that the elderly represent, particularly in developing countries. 9/

54. The conditions can be harder for women than they are for men as they get older, as a result of their different experiences, including the inequalities they have met with in the past. A significant number of older women live alone because they have been widowed, divorced or abandoned, and they become progressively poorer with age. Having a longer expectation of life than men, women are more affected by the way the difference in longevity impinges on living arrangements, income, health care and other support systems. Studies show that aging women suffer from disability more often than aging men. This is particularly true for women over the age of 75.

55. Many aspects of older women's economic insecurity derive from the fact that in their younger days they had frequently worked in lower-paid occupations, had done less career planning and had interrupted their careers more often to take care of their families. As a result, they receive lower social security benefits than men. Furthermore, in some countries the age of retirement from formal employment is lower for females than for males, thus limiting the contributory years for employment-related benefits and often, thereby reducing the amount of the benefit.

56. Social policies designed to prevent vulnerability in later life are necessary. Adequate education and professional training in youth is the best investment for a woman and lays down the conditions for later economic independence. Preventive policies also include conditions for equitable and independent distribution of social benefits to women, taking into account the number of years a woman has spent in caring for children and other dependants, the resulting disadvantages compared with men in the labour market and different career possibilities. Other preventive social policy measures could include encouraging women both to take up jobs with career possibilities and to re-enter the labour market. In this sense, many tax laws still treat men and women or couples unequally, which may well discourage economic participation by women.

57. Care for the elderly is usually provided by the family and especially by the female members of the household. While emotional ties and mutual support among family members continue to exist throughout the world, demographic and other changes will increasingly challenge the capacity of the family to continue this supportive role. Women play an important role in providing family support. The increasing number of elderly has implications for society and especially for younger women, who traditionally assume the role of primary care-giver in the family. Smaller families mean that there are fewer potential care-givers. Migration from the country to the towns also reduces the effectiveness of traditional multi-generational households.

58. Measures can be taken to meet the needs of older women for cash, income, food and clothing, shelter, transport, health care, community and family support. One option is to redistribute responsibilities and services. The sharing of care and social services for the elderly between the family and the community is of particular importance and non-governmental organizations and other voluntary agencies have much to contribute in this respect.

4. Women with disabilities

59. For disabled women, the disadvantages created by the double discrimination of gender and disability are particularly onerous. Disability is often related to other social and economic factors, such as age, sickness, unemployment or refugee status, and specific situations may involve a cumulation of risk factors.

60. Disabled women are more likely than disabled men to experience the social isolation engendered by the myths and fears surrounding disability. This is particularly true for societies where traditional role concepts determine the status of women. In many cases, a woman with a disability remains confined to the home and rarely goes outdoors. Culturally inherited superstitions about disability and disabled people can make a disabled woman and the people around her feel embarrassed or ashamed. Besides the traditional role model of women in society, the stereotyped image of women's beauty in the media also aggravates living conditions for women who can neither subscribe to traditional female roles nor fulfil stereotyped expectations. The invisibility of disabled women and the stereotyped portrayal of able women in the media contribute to ignorance about the situation of disabled women and resulting discrimination.

61. The traditional roles attributed to women influence all spheres of their lives and add further to the obstacles they encounter. These obstacles can only be overcome when society acknowledges more widely the capacity of disabled women to function as a normal member of society within the limits of their disabilities.

62. Disabled women's desire for independence and autonomy is an essential concern. Many women with disabilities would prefer autonomy and independence to remaining in the care of their family or specialized institutions. When seeking to establish their own living arrangements, disabled women often have considerable difficulty in obtaining moral and financial support. The additional lack of suitable housing schemes for disabled couples and especially for single people makes independent living more difficult.

63. Although many women with disabilities want to set up a family and have children, there is evidence that disabled men have more opportunities than disabled women to establish their own households. Compared with disabled men and non-disabled women, women with disabilities are more likely not to marry at all, to marry later or to divorce if they do marry. Surveys show that in a number of developing countries disabled women are considered less marriageable. 10/ Non-disabled men are less prepared to take a disabled wife, whereas women are more ready to accept a disabled partner because of their traditional caring role. Motherhood and child-rearing are other areas where women with disabilities face difficulties and have to combat stereotyping. Many disabled women have little or no access to family planning methods or are treated as though they were minors. Their desire for motherhood is not taken seriously and they have problems in gaining access to information and services related to their special needs. Moreover, disabled women who do have children are

often afraid of losing custody over them, especially when there is a divorce or when they are the head of the household.

64. Statistics show that disabled girls and women are more likely to be the victims of violence because of their vulnerability, especially if they have mental or communication disabilities. Often they do not know how to prevent the occurrence of violence, how to recognize when violence has occurred nor how to report such acts. Often the disabled woman, her family and the social service personnel do not know how to take precautions against sexual abuse.

65. Inadequate access to training and rehabilitation limits the opportunities for full participation and equality. Rehabilitation centres are often situated in cities and large metropolitan areas and provide training that is relevant to life and employment in urban areas. Disabled women living far from the rehabilitation centres or in rural areas often have no priority when it comes to transportation or are not encouraged to move to another area. This does not only apply to developing countries. Medical rehabilitation services are often not "gender-neutral": some are available only to women up to a certain age, and professional rehabilitation schemes are geared to the needs of disabled men and offer rehabilitation into jobs that are male-oriented.

66. Disabled women are likely to have less formal education than other women. They are less likely to be encouraged by their families and schools to obtain further education. If women become disabled later in their life, they are often not encouraged to continue in further education. There is evidence that more boys than girls are enrolled in specialized schools. Educating a boy with disabilities takes priority over educating a disabled girl.

67. Disabled women have more difficulties in finding employment than disabled men as a result of their lack of education and training. Compared with disabled men, there is a far lower percentage of disabled women in the labour force and disabled women receive much lower wages. They generally work in low-skilled and poorly paid jobs in industry, public administration and the service sector. Disabled women may be refused jobs on the grounds of their appearance. When legislation or practices can combine to discourage women with disabilities from participating in the labour force.

68. As a consequence of lower participation in the labour market, disabled women belong to the poorest groups of society. Many depend on social welfare benefits, which are paid to their families and not directly to them. Basic financial support is needed to compensate for disability-related services such as transportation, personal services, housing, technical aids and health care. Disabled women have less access to equipment and technical aids, and in any case these may not be designed to meet their particular needs.

5. Female heads of household

69. It is often argued that the concept of "head of household" is obsolete in societies where joint heads are increasingly the rule, and that, as usually defined for census purposes, it ignores the economic contribution women make to the household. The Expert Group Meeting on Vulnerable Women, however, reaffirmed the usefulness of the concept of female "headship" as an indicator for poverty and as an identifier of the proportion of households primarily dependent on women for their economic well being. As long as the household is the unit of analysis and the target of policies (for example of policies in

agriculture and housing), it will be useful to recognize the existence of households headed by women.

70. Women who are heads of household or "the sole supporters of families",* constitute a group of women who may become disadvantaged. Their situation is, however, related to the situation of everyone who lives in the household that they head. Policy-makers, therefore, cannot plan for female heads of households without dealing with the entire household as a unit. Much research suggests that such households are at the core of intergenerational transmission of poverty and family disruption.

71. On the basis of the data available, it has been estimated that one third of all households in the developing countries, and between one quarter and one third of households world-wide, are currently headed by women. 11/ The lack of comparability between data, and the absence of systematic reporting of headship by sex at the national level makes it impossible to give an accurate picture of the incidence and geographical spread of households headed by females. The incidence of these households is, however, increasing.

72. This trend is fostered by various factors, including the disruption of traditional systems of income transfers from fathers to mothers and their children. This detachment from male earning power may be the result of economic development as well as of growing poverty which, in some countries, may force men to run away from their responsibilities for family maintenance. 5/ Other economic and social factors that may result in the formation of households headed by females are: sex-specific migration either in regions of male outmigration or in cities of predominantly female in-migration; age differences at marriage and the associated levels of widowhood, marital disruption or adolescent fertility. Specific customs regarding inheritance or cultural factors, such as the independent budgets maintained by women in Africa, may lead to households being headed or maintained by women. Finally, exceptional factors such as wars or famines may also intervene.

73. Households headed by females are overrepresented among the poor, have a lower income, less land and smaller farms. Additionally, they have less access to credit. 5/, 12/ Evidence from surveys in countries such as Colombia, Côte d'Ivoire, India, Kenya, Malawi and Mexico, is mixed, however. It is acknowledged that households headed by women are not a homogeneous group, some of them being less vulnerable than others. As stated by one researcher, "woman-headed households are not undifferentiated and should not be treated as such". 13/

74. The specific vulnerability of such households can be attributed to factors arising from their composition and their dependency ratio, factors arising from the gender of the head of the household, and factors arising from the unusual combination of being a woman and being a head of household. 5/ The latter refers to the double burden experienced by women heads of household, and to the constraint this burden places on their time and economic participation. Female heads of household are vulnerable because of the cumulative effects of

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*As referred to in the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women (see footnote 1 below), chapter IV, section I.

past lack of access to education, training and job opportunities, in addition to the discrimination all women face in the labour market. These factors diminish women's ability to provide for the subsistence of their households. They can also influence the attitude of society towards these households, as illustrated in many countries by certain legal rights that are denied to women in general and to female heads of household in particular. Policies to promote equal access by women to education and training, credit, land, technology and other productive assets, as well as policies to eliminate discrimination against women generally in all fields, would have a long-term positive impact on female-headed households, since all women would be better equipped to assume economic responsibility for the household.

75. Owing to the constraints faced by households headed by women, actions also need to be targeted towards female heads and other members of their households. Any possible adverse effects of such targeting may be avoided by using competent and decentralized agencies, which make sure that the benefits are not diverted. The broad diversity in the situations and characteristics of such households, and the extreme vulnerability associated with certain situations, such as being a mother with children who has never been married, call for specific actions. Existing structures and programmes, such as food subsidies and programmes targeting poor households, especially in housing and agriculture, may be used to identify households headed by women, as well as the poorer among them. However, there it might be necessary to modify existing mechanisms to ensure efficient identification of and response to the needs of such households. Identification could be undertaken through neighbourhood organizations, health services and educational or child-care institutions.

76. Multisectoral approaches are also appropriate, as many of the factors inducing vulnerability in female-headed households are interlinked. Policies with a legal, social-welfare and economic orientation may all be necessary. For example, the provision of child care may not be adequate if the children work to contribute to the households' economic survival.

77. In particular, targeted policies must move beyond social welfare programmes to development-oriented actions that provide women heads of household with the means of participating in development. The promotion of employment, as well as educational and training schemes adapted to the particular needs and constraints of female-headed households, have a positive effect. In addition, the job counselling and training programmes developed in some countries by institutions involved in providing social support to female-headed households appear to be an effective approach. Giving all women, and women heads of household in particular, access to credit for production, consumption and other activities is a promising method, particularly when it employs flexible approaches to banking and collateral. Access to land and technology can be promoted by suitably adapting extension programmes and legal or other actions.

78. Assistance in the form of social support, welfare and counselling is also needed during particular periods of hardship, or in association with certain events, such as childbirth, widowhood or divorce. During periods of economic adjustment, programmes targeted at female heads of household may be necessary. The Expert Group Meeting on Vulnerable Women recommended that poverty-alleviation programmes implemented in the context of adjustment policies

should target female-headed households. Actions taken to ensure that households headed by women enjoy a minimum level of nutrition and food security are essential. There is a special need for counselling regarding children and career development.

79. Social services, especially health services, may need to be adapted to ensure that female heads of household and their children are not excluded from benefits because of the limited time they have available. For example, the hours of service delivery could be extended and information could be targeted to female heads of households; the social services staff could also be given relevant training. To improve society's appreciation of the actual and potential contribution of women in general, and of female heads of household in particular, general information programmes need to be undertaken, including media and public information campaigns.

Notes

1/ Report of the World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace, Nairobi, 15-26 July 1985 (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.85.IV.10), chap. I, sect. A.

2/ Ibid., para. 277.

3/ See "A general approach to vulnerability", background paper prepared by the Secretariat for the Expert Group Meeting on Vulnerable Women, held at Vienna from 26 to 30 November 1990.

4/ "Obstacles to full integration of young women into society", Secretariat paper presented at the International Symposium on the Integration of Young People into Society, held at Toledo from 4 to 8 June 1990.

5/ See Mayra Buvinić, "The vulnerability of women-headed households: policy questions and options for Latin America and the Caribbean", working paper presented at the Expert Group Meeting on Vulnerable Women, held at Vienna from 26 to 30 November 1990.

6/ See "Interrelationships between the status of women and HIV-epidemic: a review of published literature", background paper prepared by the Secretariat for the Expert Group Meeting on Women and HIV/AIDS and the role of National Machinery for the Advancement of Women, held at Vienna from 24 to 28 September 1990.

7/ See "Migrant women as a vulnerable group", paper prepared by the Secretariat for the Seminar on International Female Migrants, held at San Miniato, Italy, from 27 to 30 March 1990.

8/ See AARP/IFA Global Link for Midlife and Older Women, "Background report on elderly women", paper presented at the Expert Group Meeting on Vulnerable Women, held at Vienna from 26 to 30 November 1990.

9/ See Jacques du Guerny, "Social policies and planning for midlife and older women in Latin America: an international approach", printed in AARP, Pan American Health Organization, Midlife and Older Women in Latin America and the Caribbean.

10/ See "Women and disability, some issues", working paper prepared by the Secretariat for the Seminar on Disabled Women, held at Vienna from 20 to 24 August 1990.

11/ See Farida Shaheed, "Female-headed households", working paper prepared for the Expert Group Meeting on Vulnerable Women, held at Vienna from 26 to 30 November 1990.

12/ See Population Council, International Center for Research on Women, "Notes from seminar IV of the joint seminar series on the determinants and consequences of female headed households: Family structure, female headship and poverty in developing countries: issues for the 1990s', held at the Carnegie Endowment for Peace, Washington, D.C., on 28 November 1989".

13/ Nadia H. Youssef and Carol B. Hetler, "Establishing the economic condition of women-headed households in the third world: a new approach", in Women and poverty in the third world, Mayra Buvinić, Margaret A. Lycette and William Paul McGreevey, eds. (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1978), p. 231.

Annex

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS ADOPTED BY THE EXPERT GROUP MEETING ON VULNERABLE WOMEN

1. "Vulnerability" was recognized as a useful concept for identifying groups at risk, as well as the factors that operate to create disadvantaged situations. It was felt important, however, to avoid the ideas of victimization, helplessness, passivity and guilt often associated with the concept of vulnerability. The Expert Group underlined the fact that women in general, and vulnerable women in particular, were making important economic contributions to society and the family, despite the many constraints they faced. It noted the need to enhance these women's ability to contribute to and benefit from economic development.

I. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

2. A political will at the highest political level is an essential precondition to the promotion and implementation of policies for the advancement of women and for dealing with the specific problems of vulnerable groups. This political will is more likely to exist when women as a whole, as well as specific groups, are enabled to make their interests known to decision-makers.

3. There is a considerable overlap between the different groups, both in terms of individuals and of problems. All groups make substantial contributions to society in less than ideal circumstances. Disadvantages may accumulate when an individual belongs to several groups. Many elderly women are disabled, and young and old women can be part of households headed by females or indeed may themselves head a household.

4. Although there is broad diversity within each of the groups of vulnerable women, there are problems common to all groups that need to be tackled by common policies and strategies. Examples of common issues include marginalization from society, exposure to violence, the problem of care-giving and the requirement for shared responsibility within the family and between family and society.

II. IMPACT OF GENERAL POLICIES

5. General policies for the advancement of women should benefit vulnerable women, as should policies targeting a given vulnerable group on a "gender-neutral" basis. Policy directed towards issues such as disability, migrant status, aging and youth, however, can be unintentionally structured around male needs and roles and may result in the exclusion of women from benefits. Therefore, in their planning and implementation, both types of policies should take into account the disadvantages and needs of these groups of women, to rectify their unequal access to benefits and thus make it possible for them to be beneficiaries. The Expert Group noted the important role of non-governmental organizations in identifying, developing and advocating policies for vulnerable groups.

6. Programmes for women in general, or for specific groups, should be viewed from the "life-course" perspective. Targeting age groups with actions to prevent the emergence of problems could reduce the incidence of such problems later on.

7. Education is a significant common factor, of paramount importance in the advancement of women generally and for specific groups, and is also an investment in the future. A major effort should be made to ensure full access by women of all ages, including older women, to education and training that will increase their economic and social opportunities.

8. Investment in health and nutrition, including the provision of adequate food and nutrition guidance, is essential in dealing with the problems of all groups and in confronting emerging issues. Actions should therefore deal with specific areas affecting vulnerable women, such as the provision of safe water, maternal and child health care, access to the means of improving food production and programmes reducing the risk of acquiring the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)-acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS).

9. Public awareness and positive perceptions about women who are members of vulnerable groups should be increased. Mass media should play an important role in portraying the variety and diversity of women in different situations and should emphasize their contributions to society as a means of producing change in public attitudes towards women in general and vulnerable women in particular. Special efforts should be made to make men and women working in the mass media sensitive to this need. The United Nations should increase its efforts to disseminate information on these groups and make it accessible to all women, including those with sensory disabilities.

III. IMPLEMENTING MECHANISMS

10. The Commission on the Status of Women should consider ways in which the specific needs of vulnerable women can be integrated into the formulation of mainstream United Nations policy on disabled persons, migrant workers, the elderly and youth, as well as into policy formulation on issues related to the problems of female heads of household.

11. To confront the problems of these groups of women, Governments, non-governmental organizations and the community all have to take action. Their respective roles should be defined in terms of their functions. Governments provide the legal and normative frameworks, and mobilize and distribute public resources. Non-governmental organizations are particularly effective in implementing programmes and in channelling the needs of the groups to be benefited. The local community is the place where needs and resources can best be joined and for that reason decentralized approaches to implementation should be favoured.

12. Putting power in the hands of vulnerable women should be seen as the key to designing adequate policies for these groups. Non-governmental organizations and other interest groups play a crucial role in the process of empowerment, by giving women the means and opportunities to participate in or influence decision-making on social and economic policies.

13. A suitable public administration and institutional infrastructure is also needed. The capacity of the public sector to plan and deliver services should

be improved through institutional development and development assistance where necessary. Specifically, government officials should be sensitive to the needs and possibilities of these groups of women. Sensitivity can be developed by training staff at all levels. It can be enhanced by the existence of accessible and credible information on the cost-effectiveness of programmes to meet the needs of vulnerable groups.

14. Governments should establish criteria, including flexible legislation and regulations, to ensure that programmes take into account both the needs and potential of these groups. The means of monitoring the implementation of legislation and the use of funds should be covered by the programmes. Governments should adopt a participatory approach to programme design by involving representatives of the groups concerned in the design process, as well as in the management and execution of the ensuing programmes, whether aimed at the needs of migrants, disabled persons, youth, the elderly or the poorest households.

15. To achieve this, non-governmental organizations at the national and community level should press Governments to ensure that policies and actions adequately meet the needs of these groups of women. Non-governmental organizations should include representatives of the intended beneficiaries and should participate in mobilizing information on their needs and potential. They should also monitor the public programmes to ensure that implementation is swift and effective.

16. The importance of a well-functioning national machinery for the advancement of women was stressed. It was recommended that the national machinery should work closely with non-governmental organizations concerned with the issues and should encourage non-governmental organizations to co-operate with each other.

17. Governments should take steps to create the legal and institutional environment necessary for a diversity of national and community-level organizations to function effectively. Where it is clear that the programmes are effective, they should be implemented through or in co-operation with, such organizations, particularly those that include the intended beneficiaries. This should also serve to strengthen the non-governmental organizations.

18. Organizations representing the interests of specific groups of women are often particularly effective advocates, as their focus and commitment is greater than those of organizations with a broader scope. Given the common interests of most of these groups in the advancement of women and in social and economic justice, by joining forces they would multiply their strength and impact and become a major factor in the advancement of women, as well as in the promotion of their specific concerns. This "multiple tracking" of organizations, by focusing variously on group-specific and gender issues, forming alliances and co-operating in implementation, should become an integral part of strategies for the advancement of women, and of strategies for solving the problems of a specific group.

19. National and community-based organizations should be strengthened, especially through the development of leadership, management and communication skills. Techniques such as group training and "mentoring" should be used. Organizations that have particular experience and skill in advocacy should help other organizations to develop similar skills as part of the effort to achieve common objectives.

20. The principles of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (General Assembly resolution 34/180, annex) should be applied in law and practice at the national level, taking into account the needs of vulnerable women. Non-governmental organizations should play an important role in monitoring national implementation of the Convention. National mechanisms for reporting to the United Nations should be used effectively, including status reports on the needs of vulnerable women.

III. RESOURCES

21. In addition to advocating increased public resources for the advancement of women and for the solution of problems of specific groups, obtaining international development resources from different sources is important. Efforts should be made by international agencies to assemble and disseminate information on possible sources of funding. Project document and reporting procedures should be simplified, training in project formulation should be provided and, in developing countries, the United Nations Development Programme and other international organizations should assist national non-governmental organizations in preparing and directing project requests.

22. Given the changing priorities in development assistance, but taking into account the interlinkages between the advancement of women, the problems of specific groups and other issues, composite approaches in project design could increase the amount of resources available. Mainstreaming the concerns of women and of specific groups in larger projects in fields like education, health, nutrition, population, environment, food production, small enterprises, political participation and housing could be important, particularly if the concerns of women would otherwise be left out.

23. The Expert Group concludes that empowering women to participate in decision-making is an integral component of women's overall well-being.

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PRIORITY THEMES: DEVELOPMENT

NATIONAL, REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL MACHINERY FOR THE EFFECTIVE INTEGRATION OF WOMEN IN THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS, INCLUDING NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

Report of the Secretary-General

SUMMARY

The Economic and Social Council, in its resolution 1987/24, selected the topic of national, regional and international machinery for the effective integration of women in the development process, including non-governmental organizations, under the priority theme of development, for discussion by the Commission at its thirty-fifth session. Based on previous expert groups and a seminar, specialized expert groups, informal consultations and field missions, the specific problems of national machinery are presented in terms of needs for assistance in strengthening them and the means of achieving this. The report identifies the acquisition, analysis and dissemination of information on the advancement of women as an essential factor for success by national machinery. It suggests that location, staff improvement, acquisition of new technologies and development of networking at different levels, especially with non-governmental organizations and with the United Nations system, are important measures to be taken and focuses for assistance.

*E/CN.6/1991/1.

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INTRODUCTION

1. National machinery was selected as a priority theme, as decided by the Economic and Social Council in its resolution 1987/24, for the Commission on the Status of Women under the rubric of equality in 1988 and under the rubric of development in 1991. This responds to a growing realization of the importance of national machinery as an essential element in the promotion and implementation of the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women. 1/ The role and structure of national machinery have been considered at a number of meetings during the past three years.* The first diagnosis was presented to the Commission at its thirty-second session in 1988 in the report of the Secretary-General (E/CN.6/1988/3). One result of the ensuing discussion is reflected in Council resolution 1988/30, which invited Governments of developing countries to give priority within the context of their overall request for development assistance proposals for assistance to strengthen national machinery for the advancement of women or its equivalent. This was underscored by the Commission in 1990, when it devoted an entire section to the issue in its recommendations arising from the first review and appraisal of the implementation of the Nairobi Strategies adopted by the Council in its resolution 1990/15, annex. Recommendation XXIII stresses the active role the United Nations system should play in strengthening national machinery.

2. The priority theme for development in 1991 is "National, regional and international machinery, including non-governmental organizations, for the effective integration of women in the development process". In determining its focus, the Secretariat proposed that the Commission, at its thirty-fourth session, should concentrate on the most effective means of strengthening national machinery to make it an effective instrument for the integration of women in development (E/CN.6/1990/CRP.1). Particular attention should be paid to the role of regional and international institutions in providing support and the role of non-governmental organizations should be examined as part of the international effort to support national efforts.

3. Several seminars have also dealt with the subject during 1990 including one in francophone Africa and others on women and HIV/AIDS and the role of national machinery.** The periodic meetings of Commonwealth ministers responsible for women's affairs have also dealt with this issue, most recently in October 1990. A number of informal consultations between operational organizations have taken place, both within the United Nations system and between bilateral development assistance agencies, on co-ordination and approaches.

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*For example, the Seminar on National Machinery for Monitoring and Improving the Status of Women, Vienna, from 28 September to 2 October 1987, and the Seminar on Information Systems for the Advancement of Women for National Machinery, Vienna, from 25 to 29 January 1988.

**Séminaire sur les Interactions entre la Condition de la Femme et les Phénomènes Démographiques en Afrique Francophone au Sud du Sahara, Lomé, 28 mai-1er juin 1990; Expert Group Meeting on Women and HIV/AIDS and the Role of National Machinery for the Advancement of Women, Vienna, from 24 to 28 September 1990. In addition, several seminars on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women have dealt with the role of national machinery, notably the Commemorative Seminar on the Convention, held at Kiev from 2 to 12 September 1990.

During the past year, several diagnostic missions to countries have taken place. Finally, several organizations of the United Nations system have been involved in assistance to national machinery, including the Division for the Advancement of Women of the Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations are involved in assisting national machinery. There exists, therefore, a variety of diagnostic information that has been used in this report.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

4. The role of national machinery in the implementation of the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women was set out in the Strategies themselves, in subsequent resolutions and in the first review and appraisal of the Nairobi Strategies. Most countries have a national machinery in some form but most do not function as effectively as they could and, if they are to perform their assigned role, they will need more support at all levels.

5. The main functions of national machinery are to promote the integration of women's needs and concerns into government policies and programmes, to mobilize grass-roots support and to provide information at the national and international levels. Acquisition, analysis and dissemination of information on the status of women in a country is essential. By using this information, national machinery can demonstrate the consequences of policies on women, expose instances where the situation of women is unsatisfactory and provide the basis for reporting at the international level. Some of the areas in which the role of national machinery is recognized include population, demographics, women and HIV/AIDS, and implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women adopted by the General Assembly in resolution 34/180, annex.

6. While in some countries national machinery is a significant factor in promoting the advancement of women, most lack a strong technical capacity or are precariously located in the government structure. They frequently lack resources for staff and equipment. The organizational units concerned are often not considered essential to the operation of the public sector, especially when there is an emphasis on incorporating women's issues into the mainstream of development, and are often located in weak ministries or based on temporary and contingent funding. When the machinery is linked with the political process or is part of a political party or movement, its political strength is partly offset by its precarious nature. In a number of instances where the United Nations Development Fund for Women was called upon to assist in developing medium- or long-term plans of action for national machinery, it discovered that one of the most difficult stages is for national machinery to define and articulate its mandate. In some instances, mandates have never been institutionalized or clearly spelled out.

7. The issue, however, should not be one of location or politics, but should rather concern the capacity of the organization to fulfil its function. This has to do with both resources and location.

8. Those responsible clearly state that national machinery can be effective only if there is political will on the part of Government to allow the advancement of women to be pursued actively. This implies locating the machinery where information is accessible, where it can actively influence decisions and reach out to grass-roots organizations and to the main implementing organizations for programmes that affect women.

9. At the national level, it is necessary to enable national machinery to make a claim on public resources and to gain prominence. One means to do this is through alliances with national non-governmental organizations and a structure that permits the exchange of information and attracts support, for example, by setting up networks of women's units and focal points within sectoral ministries.

10. There are many common experiences among countries in the same region and most developing areas have regional institutions to build on these. The regional commissions can develop a regional network, in co-operation with operational organizations of the United Nations system, such as Women's Information Network for Asia and the Pacific (WINAP), which was developed by the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific.

11. At the international level, the use of development assistance as a means of providing resources for expertise and equipment is an extension to national machinery of the kinds of support given in other areas and could be expanded. National Governments can use core allocations of the indicative planning figures of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to obtain resources to strengthen national machinery. In addition, the systematic exchange of experience through the flow of information from organizations of the United Nations system as well as meetings and seminars at which national machinery can participate are ways of providing support. An important aspect is for operational actors to involve national machinery as a source of information or directly in formulating or appraising projects intended to have an impact on women.

12. The United Nations system can provide other assistance to national machinery, for example, the Division can assist in information use, implementing the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, population questions and specific problems such as the human immunodeficiency virus and the acquired immunodeficiency syndrome. UNIFEM provides assistance to national machinery to strengthen their capacities in the following areas: management; strategic planning; staff training; data collection and research; legislation; project preparation, implementation and execution; coalition building and advocacy on behalf of women. Regional commissions assist in regional networking and information exchange.

13. To improve the co-ordination of development assistance to national machinery, the existence of an organization performing a clearing-house function, which keeps track of national machinery and which of these are being assisted, would be helpful. To an extent this is being done by both the Division and UNIFEM, which exchange information. It is important for both bilateral and multilateral donors to make use of this information as well as to provide their own to UNIFEM, the Division and the regional commissions. At the country level, efforts to combine forces should be facilitated by the women in development (WID) focal points in all UNDP offices.

I. SITUATION AND TRENDS

14. In the "Directory of national machinery for the advancement of women" maintained by the Division for the Advancement of Women, 101 countries report the existence of national machinery. Of developing countries, 54 per cent report having machinery, compared with 89 per cent of developed countries.

15. There are few differences, other than that between developing and developed countries as a whole, between countries reporting national machinery or not in terms of usual development indicators such as gross domestic product, indicators of educational equality or labour-force participation. Rich and poor countries alike have national machinery and existing inequality in the population does not explain why countries lack national machinery. However, fewer small than large countries have national machinery. National machinery by region is shown in table 1. Of the countries without national machinery, 69 per cent have populations below the world median of 8.4 million, while of the countries having national machinery, only 38 per cent have below the median population.

Table 1. National machinery, by region

Countries with national machinery	Region				
	Africa	Asia and Pacific	Europe and others	Latin America and Carribean	Total
Percentage	55.8	41.9	88.9	66.7	61.6
Number	52	43	36	33	164 a/

a/ All Member States plus four observers.

16. Almost three quarters of the countries that have signed or ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women have national machinery (table 2); only 26 States parties have not reported one. By contrast, only a third of the countries that have not signed or ratified the Convention have national machinery.

Table 2. Countries having national machinery, by status with regard to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

Countries with national machinery	Signed or ratified the convention	Neither signed nor ratified the convention	Total
Percentage	71.5	37.5	61.6
Number	116	48	164 a/

a/ All Member States plus four observers.

A. Organizational location

17. The Commission on the Status of Women concluded in the first review and appraisal of the Strategies that "the effectiveness of national machinery has been found to depend on the political commitment of Governments, as reflected in appropriate resource levels, institutional location, competence in technical fields and ability to use information" (Council resolution 1990/15). It recommended, regarding location, that national machinery should be given an institutional location allowing it to have a direct effect on government policy. The preferred model is one based on a central unit linked with "specialized centres of responsibility in sectoral departments and ministries" (Council resolution 1988/30).

18. In national reports considered in the report of the Secretary-General on progress at the national, regional and international levels in the implementation of the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women (E/CN.6/1990/5), many countries raised questions on the structure and management of national machinery, particularly its location and relationships with other parts of the Government. Those issues were seen as the main internal obstacles to the effective functioning of national machinery, while the main external obstacle, in those countries where national machinery was accorded a low priority, was considered to be the overall low status of women.

19. Most national machinery is located in the formal government structure. Of the countries included in the "Directory of national machinery", 11 per cent locate the machinery in the office of the president or prime minister, while 67 per cent place it in other government units. Of the responding countries, 11 per cent reported that national machinery was comprised of non-governmental organizations of which 11 per cent were advisory committees or mixed arrangements. This distribution reflects an increase in the proportion of national machinery located in government offices compared to five years ago, when 26 per cent of responding countries reported that their national machinery comprised non-governmental organizations, mostly affiliated with a political party. 2/

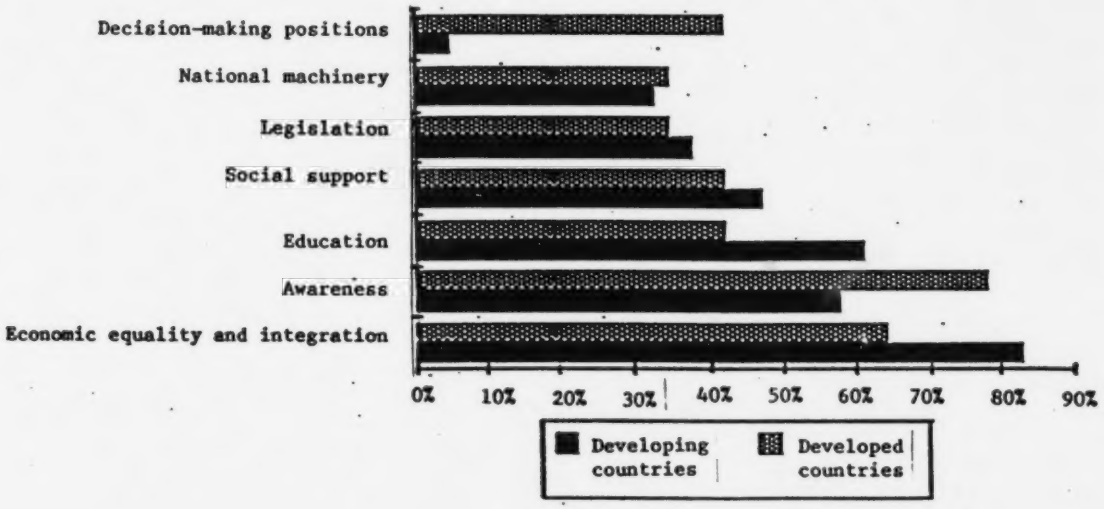
20. There is a growing tendency for Governments to locate national machinery in central ministries charged with planning and policy-making, supplemented by sister units in other ministries. For example, the Congo in late 1989 established a Division for Integration of Women in Development in the Ministry of Planning and high-level counterparts in several sectoral ministries. More commonly, however, the national machinery is located in social affairs ministries or in commissions and councils related to social questions. Preference was expressed at the Commemorative Seminar on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, held at Kiev in 1990, for ministries of women's affairs.

B. Priorities and activities

21. A survey on the activities undertaken by national machinery was conducted in 1989 by the Division for the Advancement of Women and reported in Women 2000, No. 3, 1989. Fifty countries replied: 36 developing and 14 developed. The priorities reported are shown in the figure below. High priority was assigned to overcoming employment problems, including the establishment of equal pay for work of equal value, co-operatives, self-reliance projects and assistance to rural women. A second priority was awareness-raising campaigns at various levels and efforts to improve

education, by reducing illiteracy and providing skill training or by encouraging women to take advantage of higher education opportunities. Other priorities included provision of social support measures, including child-care facilities, health services and family planning advice; influencing, drafting, implementing or amending equality legislation; action taken to strengthen their own offices and influence; and efforts to increase women's participation in decision-making and political activities. Developed countries gave relatively higher importance to decision-making and awareness promotion than did developing countries.

Priorities indicated by national machinery



22. The developing countries that replied to the survey reported, in most cases, a combination of small-scale activities at the local level coupled with efforts to intervene in national policy. Examples of locally focused action included setting up mills in rural areas, together with sun driers and buildings (Burkina Faso), and training courses for basic life skills and handicrafts (Egypt). Examples of work on national policy included promotion of a bill in parliament to guarantee equal rights and opportunities to women (Costa Rica) and reform of the labour code (Ecuador). In contrast, the national machinery in developed countries focused more on encouraging and monitoring implementation of provisions already adopted.

23. Most national machinery are multi-purpose organizations, but have generally focused their activities on a few essential tasks: information collection and analysis for policy formulation and guidance; and information dissemination for the promotion of awareness of issues and as an instrument to encourage the removal of obstacles. Most work with and through non-governmental organizations at both national and local levels. In many countries, national machinery is also involved in emerging issues such as population questions relating to women (the situation of migrant women) and the AIDS pandemic. The same subjects were reflected in the seminars on those themes organized by the Division for the Advancement of Women during 1990.

24. A common function of national machinery is to prepare national reports on the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women for the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Thirty-five States parties are currently overdue in presenting their initial reports under the Convention. The importance of a national machinery can be seen in this area since 56 per cent of the States parties that have not reported the existence of a national machinery are overdue on their initial report and an additional 16 per cent, which prepared an initial report, are now overdue on the second periodic report, while only 28 per cent of States parties having a national machinery are overdue on their initial report and half are up to date on reporting.

25. Another function of national machinery is to monitor the effects of national development policies and programmes on the advancement of women. This has become important for development assistance as more international programmes, whether multilateral or bilateral, seek to ensure that assistance benefits women by obtaining information for both diagnostic and monitoring purposes. They often turn to the national machinery for that information. This in turn requires that the national machinery has or can acquire the necessary information, and analyses it.

C. Resources

26. In national reports prepared for the review and appraisal that referred to the functioning of national machinery, few Governments cited lack of resources as a main obstacle. The Commission, however, recommended that national machinery should be provided with sufficient resources of its own (a) to collect and disseminate information on the situation of women and on the potential consequences of government policies on women, and (b) to contribute to their advancement (Council resolution 1990/15, annex, recommendation XXIII).

27. During the 1990 update of the "Directory of national machinery", countries were requested to provide information on staff resources. Responses have been received from approximately 60 per cent of those currently included in the Directory. The median number of staff for national machinery is 14, ranging from 1 to 276 persons. A quarter of national machinery have 5 or less staff members. Staff were, on average, more numerous in Africa (63) and Asia and the Pacific (47) than in Europe and other industrialized countries (20) or Latin America and the Caribbean (9), although many in the latter region were small island countries.

28. Staff are managerial, technical or clerical. Table 3 shows the distribution of staff by type and region.

29. The adequacy of the number of staff depends on several factors including the size of each country, the size of other governmental units and the tasks expected of the national machinery.

30. The existence of adequately trained technical staff to acquire, analyse and disseminate information is an important factor. In countries with national machinery that were up to date on their CEDAW reporting, although average staff numbers were fewer than for those that were behind in their reporting, a higher percentage of staff were technical (50%) than was the case for countries that had national machinery but were overdue in reporting (34%).

Table 3. Average number of staff of national machinery
(By type and region)

Region	Type of staff		
	Managerial	Technical	Clerical
Africa	8.3	37.7	82.0
Asia and the Pacific (including Western Asia)	23.0	21.8	20.1
Europe and industrialized countries	3.8	6.3	7.4
Latin America and the Caribbean	4.2	15.2	8.0
Total	8.7	21.3	32.1

31. The ability of a national machinery to adequately manage information is also related to its access to equipment. The existence of personal computers with high capacity provides a sophisticated way of doing this at low cost. Software exists that can assist bibliographic management, analysis of statistical data and preparation of information material using desktop publishing tools. Moreover, electronic communication over networks is becoming a major method for accelerating the exchange of information. Without computers, information processing cannot be accomplished as effectively.

32. As part of the update of the "Directory of national machinery", countries were requested to provide information on the availability and access to computer technology. While 90 per cent of national machinery in developed countries reported that they had computers at their headquarters, only 44 per cent of those in developing countries had them. Of these only 20 per cent had more than one computer (against 65% in the developed countries) and no national machinery in a developing country belonged to a computer network.

II. APPROACHES TO STRENGTHENING NATIONAL MACHINERY

33. The precondition for success in strengthening national machinery is the existence of political will to promote the advancement of women. This political will is often provided as a matter of policy by political leaders who perceive the importance of the general issue. This can reflect the personal beliefs and experience of leaders and their closest advisors, or it can reflect a perception of the importance of meeting women's needs in the national political process. It also requires a conviction that the national machinery as an institution is useful to achieving this end.

34. As was noted by the Expert Group Meeting on Vulnerable Women, "this political will is more likely to exist when women as a whole, as well as specific groups, are enabled to make their interests known to decision makers" (E/CN.6/1991/2, annex). To the extent that national machinery is instrumental in making these interests known, it will generate both political support and demonstrate its utility.

35. In most countries, the advancement of women is considered a peripheral policy issue, since most problems are seen as gender-neutral. National machinery needs to provide policy analysis, project review and studies of the consequences of policies, to decision makers, to women and to women's groups, in order to show where gender-bias exists and to maintain support. Strengthening of national machinery clearly needs to be focused on improving the internal capacity to produce these services and on coalition building at three levels: within the Government, with non-governmental organizations, and with other national organizations and institutions in other countries dealing with the advancement of women.

36. The same approaches can be applied to the creation of a national machinery and to the strengthening of an existing institution. The main differences are that institutional location problems may be avoided when a new institution is being created, but refining capacity is easier in an existing institution.

A. Developing the capacity to provide services

1. Location

37. Finding a location for the national machinery is not difficult. Because Governments, regardless of their commitment to the advancement of women, have activities related to women, some unit of government is usually already involved in women's questions and could be converted into the national machinery or provide the staff for it. Whether the existing location is ideal can be questioned. Often it is within a ministry dealing with only part of the problem or approaching it in a traditional way, such as in terms of family or motherhood. This is a problem if it means isolation from decision-making on other issues.

38. An important factor is ensuring regular funding. Without established posts and an assured operating budget, the national machinery may be temporary and its activities ad hoc. It may be difficult to survive a change of government. Normally, extrabudgetary posts should be considered as additional to core posts. Because few Governments are able to move staff flexibly from function to function, location in an established ministry is often a preferred alternative, since fewer administrative arrangements need to be made. Alternatively, the sanctioned posts of an existing unit can be redeployed to a new unit.

2. Staff

39. Whether it is located in the chief executive's office, a sectoral ministry, an advisory committee or a non-governmental organization, a national machinery has to have a permanent staff. Even when the national machinery is attached to a political leader, there must be a staff to undertake the support work.

40. Technically trained staff are indispensable. Trained staff can be obtained partly by recruiting specialists either from among existing employees or as new recruits. This implies being able to offer reasonable career development. If the prestige of the national machinery is low in government, it may be difficult to attract good candidates. Those who do join however may be highly motivated. An alternative to new recruitment or redeployment is to retrain existing

staff. Training may be necessary regardless of source of staff since professionals who have studied such fields as economics or sociology are not automatically equipped to do good gender analysis.

41. In addition to analytical capabilities, having staff with communications skills is also important. Much of the work of an effective national machinery is promotional, presenting ideas and information in a convincing way. Training is also important.

42. There is also a need for staff who are good managers or who at least understand the practical problems of management. This implies understanding of how programming, budgeting and project formulation take place and how they can be improved. This is particularly important when the national machinery is expected to review projects. When it also executes projects, management and evaluation skills are of major concern.

43. Training is important, but how to provide it is always difficult given the relationship between time spent on training and the generally heavy workload of the average national machinery.

3. Equipment

44. Technological developments provide tools that help to overcome human resource constraints, especially information storage, retrieval and analysis. The average personal computer available on the international market not only has a greater capacity than most mainframe computers of 20 years ago, but also its relative cost is low. Obtaining the equipment, in most countries, may be less difficult than learning to use it effectively. International resources are available to assist in some aspects of information management.

45. Other communications techniques, such as video recorders, audio cassettes and desktop publishing, linked to personal computers, can assist in developing more effective grass-roots promotional activities. Many of these technologies are available at a low cost.

B. Networking within the Government

46. Regardless of the location of the national machinery, most work on the advancement of women is done elsewhere in government, in ministries and agencies dealing with education, health, employment, finance, agriculture and industry. An issue for national machinery is how to involve these ministries in general work on the advancement of women and how to ensure that it is successfully integrated into the mainstream of development.

1. Formal networking

47. One approach is to create a formal institutional structure. Inter-ministerial committees are common, bringing together responsible ministers to concert action. These, however, in most countries meet occasionally, and are usually attended by alternates. Networks of focal points are even more common and more successful. They are based on the identification of staff, usually at a technical level, to look after the advancement of women. For lower ranking staff, usually women, this can be a device to achieve visibility within the organization and increase motivation. National machinery can assist in developing these networks by publishing directories of focal points, providing for a regular exchange of information between them and including

national developments and substantive issues elsewhere, but this requires capacity for bibliographic searches and retrievals.

48. Joint programming and planning, as well as joint tasks can help to solidify these networks. These have included, in different units of national machinery, joint participation in preparing national reports to CEDAW or in the review and appraisal of the Nairobi Strategies, preparing national women's plans and developing national policy statements on the advancement of women.

2. Informal networking

49. Informal networking may be even more useful. Contacting someone by telephone to obtain or convey information is more efficient than organizing meetings or writing memoranda. Knowing who can be contacted is an important resource.

50. Building up such informal networks, based on common interest and perceived usefulness in daily work, should be a major task of national machinery. Seminars, training courses and other events provide reasons for participants in the network to meet with each other, and can accord recognition to officials working for the advancement of women that they might not otherwise receive.

C. Networking with national and community non-governmental organizations

51. Nationally, the main impulse for the advancement of women often comes from organizations of women that are non-governmental or have interests in groups of women, localities or problem areas. They often represent political ideas different from those of the Government. Some are organized at the national level, others at the community-level. They include academic and research institutions separate from the Government and are a valuable source of support.

52. While national and community non-governmental organizations represent a variety of interests and constituencies, they often share the characteristic that they do not have effective access to Governments, either for decision-making or provision of services. National machinery can provide a vehicle for that access and, in turn, can benefit from their support.

1. Reaching the research community

53. For the effective implementation of information gathering and analysis, linkages to the academic research community are essential. Not only does specialized national expertise exist, but there are growing regional and interregional networks of researchers concerned with women's issues. These networks have often been developed by international associations such as the African Women's Studies Association, the Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN) and the International Peace Research Association. They are also related to professional associations in countries where academic researchers have received advanced training. In many fields, researchers know each other, but the networks are often incomplete because they are based on similar professions rather than on women's issues *per se*.

54. Identifying the researchers at the national level is an important initial task. Developing an inventory of national research capacity is an easy, useful one for national machinery. It can also help to develop inter-disciplinary networks.

55. One means of strengthening links with academic researchers is to engage them in longer term studies or studies only indirectly related to current policy issues. Academic researchers can provide valuable input to national reporting on the advancement of women, especially if their research interests can be incorporated within a common framework.

2. Reaching the activist non-governmental organizations

56. The implementation of development programmes by national machinery is inevitably undertaken in conjunction with non-governmental organizations. Decentralizing the management of outreach programmes to national and community non-governmental organizations is one technique used to improve implementation.

57. Such organizations can also contribute to national policy debates on the advancement of women. National machinery can provide mechanisms for this participation. Many organize forums for non-governmental organizations when national policy decisions are being considered or national reports prepared. These can serve both to attract support and to provide input. The linkage can be strengthened on a continuing basis by the provision of information to such organizations. An inventory of existing organizations is useful.

D. International networking

58. The advancement of women in many countries has been assisted by a unique partnership between national and international organizations, both governmental and non-governmental. Despite national differences, a number of countries have had remarkably similar experiences in working for the advancement of women. The international transfer of experience can be useful. Moreover, the development of international norms, reflected in the Nairobi Strategies and in the Convention, has meant that national organizations can promote change by comparing national conditions with international norms and experience.

59. The work of individual international non-governmental organizations is often relevant to national machinery. The work of 73 such organizations was reported in Women 2000 (No. 3, 1990). In addition, there are a number of new specialized organizations dealing with specific women's issues that have not yet received consultative status with the Economic and Social Council. Examples include the International Women's Rights Action Watch (IWRAW) for the Convention, DAWN for development and the Women's Information Network (WIN) for general information.

60. Regional networks are being developed in most regions. Some of these are professional, such as the African Women's Study Association, others are advocacy groups, such as the Arab Women Solidarity Association. Many have developed under the sponsorship of the regional commissions or specialized agencies of the United Nations, or in association with them.

61. A common characteristic of these international networks is that they provide sources of information, support and recognition. A problem for national machinery is how to access the networks on a regular basis. One method is to distribute the "Directory of national machinery" to international networks. Another is to make the list of international non-governmental organizations available on a regular basis so that national machinery can be contacted. The flow of information is enhanced by the exchange of publications, and efforts to increase the participation of the staff of national machinery in meetings is another method.

III. SOURCES OF EXTERNAL ASSISTANCE

62. Ideally, national resources should be used to strengthen national machinery. This is not always possible, because of a general scarcity of resources or a lower priority for women's issues. But even when national resources are somewhat plentiful, external assistance is of benefit. The resources available in international non-governmental organizations are a source of potential assistance in training and the exchange of experience, especially for national non-governmental organizations. For developing countries, development assistance is important. A number of international sources already exist and can be used by interested countries.

A. International non-governmental organizations

63. A survey in 1990 on non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council showed that many are exclusively or largely dealing with women's concerns, which is the topic of Women's News, No. 3, 1990. These organizations have strong regional, national and local emphasis and most of their activities are carried out at these levels; they are action-oriented at the local level, and at the regional level are focused on the exchange of experience and information. Altogether, these organizations cover a wide variety of activities. They tend to focus on advocacy, women's rights, education, women's role in decision-making and income generation. They thus demonstrate concern for the economic and developmental aspects of women issues, often setting up pilot, experimental activities in education and income generation that should be of interest to the national machinery. Their micro-level work often helps to determine which experimental approaches are most successful.

64. Some international non-governmental organizations provide development assistance. For example, Co-operative for American Relief Everywhere, Inc. funds national projects in banking, credit and small-enterprise development, health and nutrition, and family planning. Organizations from the Associated Country Women of the World to Zonta International support projects, usually through other organizations. Other organizations are active in developing materials, such as visual aids, speakers, brochures, manuals and information provided by the American Association of Retired Persons and in arranging regional and international discussions of themes, as in the case of the International Council of Women.

65. International non-governmental organizations are usually willing to co-operate with national machinery directly or, more usually, through local affiliates.

B. Bilateral development assistance

66. The following bilateral donors have reported providing assistance to various units of national machinery on a bilateral basis or in conjunction with multilateral agencies: Australia, Canada, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the United States of America.

C. United Nations system

67. Most organizations of the United Nations system work with national machinery indirectly, in connection with work on women in development. Several organizations have had programmes to assist national machinery.

1. Division for the Advancement of Women

68. The Division for the Advancement of Women, located in the United Nations Office at Vienna, is the focal point for the work of the United Nations system in the advancement of women and is the secretariat of the Commission on the Status of Women and the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. As the international machinery it seeks to involve national machinery in its work. The Division's regular work programme includes maintaining the "Directory of national machinery". It also maintains the Women's Information System, a computerized bibliographic system and collection of over 2,600 references to documents produced on women within the system since 1985. It routinely invites representatives of national machinery to priority theme seminars so that, since 1986, almost all countries having national machinery have participated in at least one seminar or expert group. While its operational programme was initially small, increased requests and mandates for operational and promotional work have led the Division to begin a more focused effort to assist individual units of national machinery.

69. Using resources from the regular programme of technical co-operation of the United Nations, UNIFEM, UNFPA, the Global Programme on AIDS of the World Health Organization and from earmarked grants from bilateral sources, advisory assistance missions and visits were made to national machinery in the Congo and Venezuela in 1989 and to Bolivia, Djibouti, Honduras, Hungary and Tunisia in 1990. It is hoped that the services of an interregional advisor, as requested in Council resolution 1989/34, might be possible in the 1992-1993 programme budget. In the meantime advisory work, as well as the organization of seminars, is undertaken by consultants, as well as by staff of the Division.

70. In conformity with Council resolution 1988/30, using resources from the special trust fund and from a UNIFEM Global Project of Support to National Machinery executed by the Division, efforts have been made to develop information resources for national machinery. These have included developing and updating special software and manuals that would allow national machinery to install the WIS bibliographic system personal computers. The software package is provided free of charge to national machinery as well as to regional institutions. French versions of the software and manuals are in preparation. Technical assistance in the installation and use of bibliographic software can be arranged on request.

71. The Division organizes support to national machinery regarding the implementation of the Convention. This has included interregional, regional and subregional seminars on the Convention in Greece (1989), Guatemala (1989) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (1990); and one is being planned for the South Pacific (1991). Advisory assistance relating to ratification was provided during 1990 to Malta and Namibia. The Division has run subregional seminars directed to national machinery on specific issues, often as a follow-up to global activities. This included, in 1990, the subregional seminar on national machinery and demographic factors in francophone Africa and another on national machinery and HIV/AIDS in the Caribbean. Subregional seminars for national machinery on these and other subjects are in preparation in conjunction with funding agencies.

2. United Nations Development Fund for Women

72. In accordance with its madate, UNIFEM has responded to the requests of Governments to assist national machinery in improving the involvement of women

in national development and to collaborate with national machinery as executing or implementing agencies in order to undertake innovative activities benefiting women. Additionally, UNIFEM has been participating increasingly in the efforts of a number of international development organizations to examine the challenges facing national machinery and to shape an approach that articulates the role of donor agencies in a more closely co-ordinated, strategic and effective manner.

73. In its role as catalyst to ensure the involvement of women in mainstream development activities, and to strengthen national machinery and enable it to increase its ability to build coalitions for support both within Governments and with non-governmental and national organizations that are its constituency, UNIFEM has provided assistance to the following: Economic Community of West African States and the Southern African Development Co-ordination Conference; Belize, Bolivia, Burundi, Chile, Colombia, Dominica, Gambia, Guatemala, Honduras, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, St. Kitts and Nevis, South Pacific (Cook Islands, Marshall Islands, Vanuatu), Sri Lanka, Thailand, Venezuela and Zambia. Additionally, in both Mongolia and Viet Nam, work is being done to assist the national machinery to gain exposure and continue to support women. In other countries, such as Dominica and the Maldives, UNIFEM assistance has been used primarily to support research and data collection to allow the national machinery to better advise and assist the Government in designing policies and in planning to ensure the full integration of women into development efforts.

74. A second modality for building the capacity of units of national machinery has been in supporting them as executing or implementing agencies for a variety of initiatives in line with national development plans. In these activities, UNIFEM has worked with Belize, China, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guyana, Jamaica, Lesotho, Mali, Philippines, Sri Lanka and Zimbabwe. Through the execution or implementation of projects, national machinery can learn successful models for formulating and executing projects, building on their own administrative capacities and forging alliances with non-governmental organizations and technical ministries that they must call upon for technical expertise and collaboration.

75. UNIFEM is increasingly concerned with the need to co-ordinate efforts with all other organizations providing assistance to national machinery so as to ensure that the work being done is complementary rather than duplicative or at cross puposes and that it does not result in overfunding some national machinery while neglecting others. Momentum for this kind of co-ordination is growing and UNIFEM places a high priority on it.

3. Regional commissions

76. The regional commissions respond to the needs of national machinery through their regional mechanisms. In the case of ECA, it is mostly through the African Training and Research Centre for Women (ATRCW), which is in direct contact with the national machinery, as well as through the subregional mechanism, i.e., the Multinational Programming and Operational Centres (MULPOCs). ATRCW has published a directory of African national machinery. In the Asia and Pacific region, ESCAP has focused on direct assistance through a regional adviser and has placed considerable emphasis at the regional level on the development of an information system, i.e. Women's Information Network for Asia and the Pacific. In the Latin America and Caribbean region, the Economic

Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean has provided assistance by networking in particular through the regional Women in Development conferences.

4. Specialized bodies and agencies

77. Many specialized agencies, through their work with sectoral ministries, provide support to women's units in ministries. The Statistical Office of the United Nations, for example, provides assistance to some national machinery in the organization and use of statistics for women and in linking the work of national statistical offices with that of national machinery. It also assists national machinery by involving it in project formulation and appraisal and in training provided as part of broader activities.

IV. CO-ORDINATION OF ASSISTANCE TO NATIONAL MACHINERY

78. Consultations between organizations providing international assistance have identified a number of problems of co-ordination and approach to assisting national machinery that are being addressed.

A. Problems in co-ordination

79. The concern of development assistance organizations to implement their mandates to ensure that assistance reaches women has often led them to request information at the national level individually and unsystematically. In some countries, this has led to a duplication of effort and production of information that has had little use in national planning. It often leads a national machinery or other governmental agencies to provide similar information in different formats to a wide variety of development assistance organizations. When these organizations have provided training to nationals, it has been known to lead to competitive or contradictory training of national staff.

80. Some development assistance organizations have avoided working with national machinery, either on the basis of a perception that the machinery is not technically competent or has a political orientation felt to be incompatible with donor mandates. In some countries, different donor agencies support different institutions, leading to competition between national institutions. In several countries, cases have been reported that several different donors have attempted to assist the same national machinery, often in ignorance of each other's work.

B. Steps to improve co-ordination

81. An improved exchange of information between development assistance organizations on their activities with national machinery would improve coverage and help to avoid the duplication of effort. In consultations between donors, the need for setting up a mechanism for this was recognized. There are several options. One approach, consistent with the existing division of work, would be for the Division and UNIFEM jointly to organize an exchange of information based on the Division's links with national machinery and those of UNIFEM with development assistance agencies concerned with women and development. At the country level, the WID focal points in UNDP offices could assist bilateral and multilateral development organizations to co-ordinate their work with national machinery.

82. In order to ensure that assistance meets the real needs of national machinery, a targeted approach should be developed. One means for this would be to use the regular inter-agency meetings on the advancement of women to sharpen approaches to national machinery by the United Nations organizations.

83. As part of the preparations for the 1995 women's world conference, a special effort could be directed towards co-ordinated assistance to a limited number of units of national machinery on a voluntary basis for an initial trial period, to develop a model for close co-ordination between all organizations providing assistance to national machinery. The impact in improving effectiveness could be sufficient over a three-year period to have a demonstrative effect that could then be reported to the 1995 world conference. UNIFEM could play a key role in such a case by the organization of such an approach, including the monitoring of experimental programmes. In general, the strengthening of national machinery could be one of the priorities in the preparations of the 1995 conference.

Notes

1/ Report of the World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace, Nairobi, 15-26 July 1985 (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.85.IV.10), chap. I, sect. A.

2/ "The development of national machinery for the advancement of women and their characteristics in 1985", paper prepared by Barbara Knudson for the Seminar on National Machinery for the Advancement of Women, held at Vienna from 28 September to 2 October 1987 (SNMAW/1987/BP.1).